

# Come to the Manger

By Adrian Porter S.J.

ONE OF the very few instances in a great tradition of Christian art which has survived into the last decade of the twentieth century as a thought-provoking and popular focus of devotion is the Christmas crib. The building and adornment of our churches endows us with a great heritage of painting, sculpture, architecture, mosaic and music. Yet the multiplication of these images and the passing of time with its inevitable altering of interests and perspectives, has precipitated the redundancy of much Christian art. What was formerly the expression and inspiration of the mass of worshippers, has become the private pleasure of a few aesthetes. This does not mean that we begrudge the enjoyment of the few, far from it, but it does demand thinking about new art-forms and renewal of traditional ones in the service of *most* people who are present in the liturgical assembly. The inherited adornments of the past were once living art: teaching the faith and fostering *pietas*. And so they remain for some. The Christmas art of crib-making has not atrophied to anything like the same degree as other art-forms. It remains very popular and a very real part of the Christmas feast. But art cannot stand still for fear of becoming irrelevant to the pilgrim people of God. This must be especially so of an art which is created anew each year. So too the crib stands in peril of becoming the pleasure of a bygone age and an old religion. It seems to me imperative that we reconsider this popular form of Christian art, while it still is popular and relevant, and ask how far it is a comfortable decoration, like the Christmas Tree, or a powerful sign of the Church's proclamation and contemplation of Christ:

That the absolute Being of God should have decided to present itself in a human life, and should be able to carry out his will should be a perpetual source of wonder to anyone con-

templating the life of Jesus, should seem a thing impossible and utterly bewildering. He ought to find his mind reeling at the idea, feel as if the ground were giving way under his feet, and experience the same 'ecstasy' of incomprehension which seized Christ's contemporaries. For they were beside themselves with astonishment, stupified, overwhelmed, literally sent out of their minds; and this not once, but repeatedly.<sup>1</sup>

The earliest instances we have of nativity art, on Roman and Gallican sarcophagi circa 325 A.D., are not depictions of the gospel stories of Christ's birth<sup>2</sup> but a representation of the theological theme of Incarnation reduced to a few simple elements. This was the great age of Christological controversy, of beginnings with Justin, Irenaeus, Tertullian and Origen in the third century and of conflict between the great heresies of Arius and Apollinarius and orthodoxy in the fourth century. Contemporary doctrine is reflected in the art of the period: Christ is at the centre of attention, flanked by ox and ass which are the foster-parents of humanity, the ox in stead for Israel yoked to the burden of Law, the ass for the gentile and pagan nations loaded with the sins of idolatry,<sup>3</sup> for it is he who brings freedom and release from both these oppressions,<sup>4</sup> Mary is frequently absent, and Joseph does not appear until the 13th century; but the shepherds, important witnesses to the event, are there, as is often an Old Testament prophet bearing a scroll containing the foretale of Israel's hopes and Yahweh's promise of a Messiah.<sup>5</sup> The message of this earliest nativity art tells of a human child's birth before witnesses, foretold by prophets, who is the God Redeemer of all mankind. The Church's profession of faith of the time is concerned with Jesus, true God, true man, (there is no mention of Mary);

1. H. Urs von Balthasar, *Prayer* (Paulist Press, 1961), p.128.
2. The gospel nativity stories are found in Luke 2:1-20 and Matthew 1:25ff.
3. The association of the ass and idolatry is also found in what is thought to be the earliest representation of a crucifix where the head of Christ has

been replaced with that of an ass, presumably etched by an opponent of the Christian notion of the crucified God-man, which would have been considered idolatrous.

4. So Gregory of Nazianzus, MPG 45: 1138.
5. An example is preserved in the Lateran Museum.

We believe . . . in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God . . . of substance of the Father . . . true God of true God . . . Who for us men and our salvation came down, was incarnate and made man . . .<sup>6</sup>

Closely bound up with the debate about Christ was consideration of Mary's special position in the work of redemption. The adoption of the Marian title *Theotokos* ('Mother of God') at the Council of Ephesus in 431 A.D.<sup>7</sup> ensured an established place for Mary in nativity paintings from the fifth century onwards. Indeed, the degree to which artists reflected current theological concerns and their attendant devotion in cult is well illustrated by the appearance of cupola and curtains from the new basilicas in Bethlehem and Rome in paintings and icons of the Christmas scene.<sup>8</sup>

By the sixth century the Roman open-sided tiled shelter, the *tugurium*, is being replaced with the familiar cave setting. Though comparatively late, this development has its roots in the earliest tradition of the Church, pre-dating the appearance of nativity art itself. In the second century Justin Martyr points to the parallelism of the cave of Jesus' birth and the cave of his burial.<sup>9</sup> The themes of abasement and the Light shining in darkness are present in contemporary writings; for Irenaeus in the third century, the cave is a symbol of the cave of Hades or Hell. In the apocryphal Ethiopian *Book of Adam and Eve*, it is in a cave on the Mountain of Paradise that Eve bears her first son. Could this be a deliberate parallel to the Mary story? Lastly, in legend Adam is buried in a cave on Golgotha. Another birth-death parallel? The new Adam?

So far we have seen how theological-devotional controversy and interest went hand in hand with the elements used in the painting and iconography

of the day. The rise of the Christological problem led to a liturgical awareness that produced the new feast of Christmas and its cycle of Advent and Christmastide,<sup>10</sup> and its complementary art. With the makings and principles of the new art-form established, it is to the Middle Ages that we must go for the next important development in the Church's celebration of Christmas.

It is well known that one of the earliest examples of Christian drama is the scene at the tomb on Easter day when the angel asks the three Marys, 'Whom do you seek?'; an extant musical setting has been dated to 980 A.D. Perhaps slightly less well known is the evidence of a similar nativity drama performed at the Christmas midnight mass.<sup>11</sup> Upon the altar would be placed a painting or the figures of the Child and his Mother, covered with a veil; a candle served for the star. On either side gathered two groups of deacons representing the midwives (evidently deemed necessary for so important a birth) and the shepherds. The midwives would ask, 'Whom seek ye in the manger?' To which the shepherds replied, 'We seek Christ our Lord, a child wrapped in swaddling clothes according to the angel's word'. Then, in dramatic gesture, the veil would be drawn away revealing the infant Jesus, greeted with the singing of triple alleluias.<sup>12</sup> This little piece of liturgical drama was known as the *Praesepe* after the Latin word for stall or manger in the trope which formed the basis of the dialogue: *Quem quaeritis in Praesepe pastores dicite?* At the beginning of a tumultuous period in his spiritual life, Francis of Assisi was preparing the town of Greccio's *Praesepe* for the Christmas celebrations of 1223, when he constructed what is now generally regarded to be the first 'crib'. The small figures used in the drama-ritual at midnight Mass were left as a reminder to

6. Profession of Faith of the Council of Nicea, 325 A.D. cf. K. Rahner S.J., *The Teaching of the Catholic Church* (Mercier Press, 1967), p.424.

7. The title *Theotokos* was given to Mary after a fierce controversy, not entirely theological, between Nestorius and Cyril of Alexandria. The Council of Ephesus (431 A.D.) finally adopted Cyril's position as the Church's orthodox teaching. Cf. Rahner, op.cit., p.147.

8. Günter Ristow 'The Nativity' (Pictorial Library of Eastern Church Art, Vol. 12), p.22.

9. For example, cf. Mark 15:46.

10. The first written record extant of the late feast of Christmas in the Church is the 'Chronograph' of 354 A.D. It seems that the Donatists celebrated the feast, in which case they would have possessed it

before their schism in 312. cf. Josef Jungmann S.J., *The Early Liturgy* (D.L.T. 1960), pp.147ff.

11. Nesta de Robeck, *The Christmas Crib* (1937), pp.34ff. — a fascinating book, well worth a bedtime browse.

12. The dramatic unveiling continues in Italy, according to de Robeck (remember her book is dated 1937), during the singing of the Gloria at Midnight Mass; I am informed that the practice is still a custom in Hong Kong. An interesting modern parallel of the Christmas liturgical-drama, with possibilities for use in our churches, is the carol by Frances Chesterton, 'How far is it to Bethlehem?' set to a traditional English melody arranged by Vaughan Williams; cf. Oxford Book of Carols (1964 revd.) No. 142.

all through the Christmas season. The nature of this new help to devotion was characteristic of its instigator:

The impact of Francis' message came largely from its optimism and its sheer simplicity. Uncomplicated by theology, his appeal was direct to the soul of the individual, to reach out towards its maker in hope and gratitude.<sup>13</sup>

Other great Orders would follow his success: the Dominicans with the Rosary and the Jesuits with Eucharistic devotions.

This brief and necessarily incomplete history of the origins of our Christmas crib points up two fundamental qualities of Christian art, sadly lost in much of our heritage but distinctly yet retrievable in the case of the crib. They are: first, that art is at the service of the Church's faith, expressing (and thereby helping to form) what it believes; secondly, that art is for the Church, the whole Church and not a clique of self-appointed aesthetes, which in practice means a sort of art developed by individual communities (family, parish, in cathedrals) at the same time *their* artistic expression *and* in unity with the belief of the universal Church. Christological definition and accuracy combined with the immediacy and simplicity of Franciscan devotion. The question that now presents itself is, How do we achieve this living art-form of the crib today?

One often hears the plea that Christ or the 'true meaning' be restored to the increasingly secular Christmas festivities. This, together with the fact that many people only go to church at Christmas, suggests an important function for the crib as something which may draw people's attention to God and in particular to the mystery of redemption in Christ. The setting-up of a sign such as the crib, effectively directing man's attention, is a part of what it means to be Church:

The Church's fundamental function in every age and particularly in ours is to direct man's gaze, to point the awareness and experience of the whole of humanity towards the mystery of God, to help all men to be familiar with the profundity of the Redemption taking place in Christ Jesus.<sup>14</sup>

13. Maurice Keen, *The Pelican History of Medieval Europe* (Pelican, 1969), p.156.

14. Pope John Paul II, Encyclical 1979 *Redemptor Hominis*, 10.

15. cf. Vatican II: *Lumen Gentium* n.11 and *Apostolicam Actuositatem* n.11.

In practice the darkness and hell of the nativity cave of Irenaeus have become the idyllic fairy grottoes of our parish churches. It seems likely that the romanticism of present-day cribs acts not to direct man to God's living liberation in Christ, but rather to the dead-ended lure of fantasy. To what then, might our efforts endeavour to re-present? Two theological 'themes' pertinent to living in the 1980s and in which the mystery of our redemption will work itself out may be suggested: the family, and the condition which is mankind.

Vatican II said that the family was the fundamental 'cell' of society and of the Church<sup>15</sup> and this in the face of civilizations where the value and stability of the family is radically reduced. The theological point to be made is at once extremely simple, that family life is a priceless treasure and human right, and involvedly complex, that from the family derives experience of what it is to be sons of God: acting together as community, exchanging greetings, the capacity to listen, to forgive and to ask for forgiveness, to express gratitude, to celebrate,<sup>16</sup> to encounter the human relationship which we transcend to call God, 'Abba, our Father'. How it is to be made must be thought out and re-presented in crib-art at the level of the community whose crib it is. Prayer, graphics, homily, audio-visual display, music, a well-publicized project of Christian action, might all be used in conjunction with the liturgical rites and crib figures. Within the crib itself perhaps the family could be clearly grouped, with the other figures more distant, or by graded lighting or some other device.

The second theological 'theme' is drawn from the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius Loyola where he creates the most breathtaking vision of the mystery of redemption, and is not content to bask in 'mysticism' but rather to look, contemplate and then serve.<sup>17</sup> The vision starts from the viewpoint of God looking 'down upon the whole expanse or circuit of all the earth, filled with human beings'. Then to see these people in all their varied conditions 'in such great diversity in dress and in manner of acting. Some are white, some black; some at peace, and some at war; some weeping, some laughing; some well, some

16. cf. Directory on Children's Masses (1973), n.9.

17. Louis J. Puhl S.J., *The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius*; the quoted passages are taken from nos 101-116 of Puhl's translation.



sick; some coming into the world, and some dying'. From this minute depression comes forth the stunning realization, 'Behold, all nations in great blindness'. Out of the depths of the abyss comes the voice of God amidst the babble, swearing and blaspheming of men, 'Let us work the redemption of the human race'. The working of God takes the 'extreme poverty' of the journey to Bethlehem and the birth of Christ as its history. Here I find myself, 'a poor little unworthy slave', looking on, and desiring to 'serve them in their needs with all possible homage and reverence'. As the vision slowly winds full circle to the poverty of three lonely people in a stable, the spark of brilliant insight which Ignatius presents to us lets us see that these are the same people as those we saw before, and it is these that we must needs serve.

Again we have to ask how to re-present this vision in terms of our crib-art and the possibilities of other associated efforts. One that immediately springs to mind is the use of slides (the earth, peoples, individuals laughing, crying, being born, dying, etc.) as a background to the crib figures upon which Ignatius invites us to look and contemplate; together with a recorded sound track (the silence of space, the babble of voices, moans, cries, laughter, the voice of God, the silence of the stable). There is always, of course, a danger of becoming 'gimmicky', but this should not deter experiment and the pressing into service of modern technology to proclaim more effectively the good news to modern man. Careful and tasteful discernment does not need to be timorous.

The popularity of the crib will again be demonstrated this Christmas and next by the

crowds pushing around that familiar scene to snatch a quick prayer, or to steal a peep, or to take the children. It is probably true to say that the crib is the most important Christian art-form in the contemporary Church at large. Functioning as the focus and, in some part, inspiration of Christian festivity it throws Stations of the Cross, statues, paintings and even the Crucifix into relative shadow. At the same time it is in danger of becoming escapist and irrelevant if it does not recognize the tragic and evil elements of real life. In the crib-sign, as in others,

that real celebration, rather than a retreat from the reality of injustice and evil, occurs most authentically where these negative realities are recognized and tackled, not where they are avoided.<sup>18</sup>

A way in which we can start to ensure that this sign remains true to our faith and mission is to inquire whether a visit to the crib in the local parish church leaves a nice, warm cosy feeling like the one after that last glass of brandy on Christmas afternoon, 'God is in his heaven and all is right with the world', or challenges us to affirm and make sense of the mystery of our redemption and the joys and sorrows of mankind today. If the first reaction is discerned then consideration of the message (doctrine) of the crib and the best way of proclaiming the message (artistic-liturgical-dramatic) will prepare the ground for the next attempt at community art. Within the present attitude to the crib, few would question the maxim that 'the fervour of Christian life in the community is the condition *sine qua non* of artistic activity';<sup>19</sup> the point at issue is the precise nature of this 'fervour' — lore and legend, or a voice crying in the wilderness?

51 Horsford Road  
Brixton Hill  
London SW2 5BP

18. Harvey Cox, *The Feast of Fools* (Harper and Row, 1970), p.25.

19. Pic-Raymond Régamey, *Religious Art in the Twentieth Century* (Herder and Herder, 1963), p.245.